

Seeing Red

Because of Orange

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Imagine a young woman driving down a highway in an SUV. She's obviously distracted—touching up her makeup in the rearview mirror one minute and calling a friend on a cell phone the next. She switches the station on the radio and, dissatisfied with that choice, switches again.

She doesn't seem to notice the orange barrels along the road that signal an approaching work zone. She also doesn't seem to notice a sign telling drivers to slow down. And, tragically, she doesn't seem to notice a worker in a reflective vest—until her SUV swerves, hits him, and leaves him lying on the pavement in a pool of blood.

That's just one scenario you could see as you travel the nation's highways. I thankfully wasn't part of such a deadly situation, but I did find out that those orange, road-construction barrels can be hazardous. It happened one beautiful, spring morning as I was driving on I-64 to my job at Cheatham Annex.

Suddenly, one of the barrels toppled over from the wind and rolled onto the interstate. I couldn't merge left because the traffic was too heavy, and I didn't dare slow down for fear of being rear-ended. The only unfavorable option left was to hit the barrel at 50 mph.

I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't sure if the barrel would fly into my windshield, bounce off the bumper, or break into pieces. It didn't do any of these things. Instead, it went under my truck and wedged against the motor. As I veered off at the next exit, I glanced in the rearview mirror to find orange, plastic pieces trailing behind me.

I anxiously pulled into the parking lot of a business to inspect my truck's newest accessory. After 20 minutes of kicking and pulling—and ruining my uniform—I was able to dislodge the barrel.

When I arrived at work, I immediately called the Virginia Department of Transportation and learned that these barrels roll onto the road “all the time, all over the country.” I think they need to be weighted down. *[According to information gleaned from the website of a company that makes these construction barrels, they “may” be ballasted with recycled tire rings, sandbags, or sand-filled plastic bases. Evidently, though, there's no “requirement” for any ballasting—Ed.]*

The next time you come across an army of orange barrels warning of road construction or repairs, consider these tips from the Ohio Department of Transportation:

Expect the unexpected in any work zone along the road. Normal speed limits may be reduced, traffic lanes may be changed, and

The construction barrel looked like this once the author was able to dislodge it from under his pickup.



Barrels

people and vehicles may be working on or near the road.

Be alert, and pay attention to the signs. Diamond-shaped, orange, warning signs generally are posted in advance of road-construction projects.

Obey a flagger's directions. Besides other warning signs, a "Flagger Ahead" sign may be posted in the work zone. When you see this, stay alert and be prepared to obey the flagger, who has the same authority as a regulatory sign in a work zone. You can be cited for disobeying his directions.

Calm down. Work zones aren't there to inconvenience you personally. They're necessary to improve the roads for everyone.

Merge into the traffic as soon as possible when you see flashing-arrow panels or "Lane Closed Ahead" signs. Don't zoom up to the lane closure, then try to barge in. If everyone cooperates, traffic moves more efficiently. Motorists can help maintain traffic flow and posted speeds by moving to the appropriate lane at the first notice of an approaching work zone.

Slow down when the signs say to. A car traveling 60 mph travels 88 feet per second. If you're going 60 mph, and you pass a sign that says, "Road work 1,500 feet," you'll be in that work zone in 17 seconds.

Leave at least two seconds of braking distance between you and the car in front of you. The amount of space required to provide two seconds of stopping time will increase the faster you're driving. *[This two-second rule applies if you have an unobstructed view of the four or five cars in front of you and can monitor their actions. Otherwise, the following distance should be increased to four seconds at 50 mph.—Michael Borkowski, traffic safety specialist, Shore Safety Programs, Naval Safety Center]* The most common crash in a highway-work zone is a rear-end collision.

Keep a safe distance between your vehicle and traffic barriers, trucks, construction equipment, and workers. Just like you, highway workers want to return home safely after each day's work.

Observe the posted signs until you see one that says you've left the work zone. Some work zones, such as line painting, road patching, and mowing, are mobile, moving down the road as the work is finished. Just because you don't see the workers immediately after you see the warning signs doesn't mean they're not out there.

Expect delays; plan for them, and leave early to reach your destination on time.

Highway agencies use many ways to inform motorists about the location and duration of major work zones. Often, the agencies suggest a detour to help you avoid the work zone entirely. Plan ahead, and try an alternate route. ■